

OLENA OLIYNYK
 ORCID: 0000-0002-6786-0633
 National Aviation University, Ukraine

URBAN SPACES: FALSIFICATION VS IDENTIFICATION

FAŁSYFIKACJA I IDENTYFIKACJA PRZESTRZENI MIEJSKICH

Abstract

Inappropriate use of urban space, unrealistic town-planning strategies, creeping destruction of the historic appearance of cities seem to be the new normal. A city is becoming the playground for such falsification, and its residents are the victims. An attendant problem is the derelict and undefined condition of urban spaces, which are concentrated in downtown areas. For example, Kyiv's two main streets, Volodymyrska and Khreshchatyk, are the quintessence of the city's identity and can be said to bear the nation's "genetic code." However, the network of pedestrian public spaces along these two streets is far from formed. Public space design on this area is the subject of several master's level projects under the supervision of the author. A supplemental objective was to preserve historical identity. Spatial analysis was the research method applied.

Keywords: postmodernist cities, urban design, spatial analysis

Streszczenie

Niewłaściwe użytkowanie przestrzeni publicznych, nierealistyczne strategie urbanistyczne, stopniowe niszczenie miast historycznych stały się niemal normą współczesnej urbanistyki. Miasto staje się polem do oszustw, a ludzie ofiarami fałszerstw. Kolejnym problemem jest zaniedbanie przestrzeni miejskich, skupionych właśnie w centrach miast. Dwie centralne ulice Kijowa – Wołodomyrska i Chreszczatyk – niosą określone „kody genetyczne” narodu, uosabiające jego tożsamość. Jednak sieć publicznych przestrzeni wzdłuż tych ulic nie została sfinalizowana. Projektowanie środowiska przestrzeni publicznej stało się przedmiotem prac studentów pod kierunkiem autorki. Dodatkowym zadaniem było zachowanie tożsamości, a metodą badań była analiza przestrzenna.

Słowa kluczowe: postmodernistyczne miasta, urban design, analiz przestrzenny.

1. INTRODUCTION

Architects and urban space designers often use deception in one way or another. These include optical illusions to create the impression of a deeper perspective in Michelangelo's Piazza del Campidoglio in Rome and Architect Rossi Street in St. Petersburg, to name a few. In Baroque architecture, Solomonic columns and broken pediments were supposed to express a certain irrationality of style.

In modern urban development, however, inappropriate use of public spaces, sham town-planning strategies, underhand substitution of nondescript new buildings for a city's

historic appearance, and over-the-board falsification of history have almost become the new normal.

To an extent, a city's master plan is compromised from the very beginning: it is never implemented more than 10 percent, but its strategy is developed for 25 years and so is often used for political and populist purposes. Even though conservation is built into its development strategy, Kyiv's historic core, for example, is being gradually destroyed in the process of its master plan realization. In the process of restoring, a building's front often remains the only part of the original, the rest being unauthentic materials and functions. Falsifications of this kind are almost the standard today.

A city is the kind of society's chronicle that is constantly changed, edited and re-written instead of being preserved and studied. Urban designers and politicians often declare and offer an altogether different concept of development from the one which will be implemented. This is happening in master plan development, restoration, and organization of urban space. A city is becoming the playground for such falsification, and its residents are the victims. They are handed a forged history, fictitious memories, and unrealistic concepts. In this fake environment, illusions become the reality, other people's dreams – your very own, and movie scenarios – a part of your life. While authentic built environment may look unattractive, airbrushed facades and postmodernist spaces are passed off as paragons of beauty.

The issue of preserving our cities' identity in the process of their reconstruction, discovering their true history, enhancing the best features of urban spaces and filling them with local symbolism is fast becoming a top priority. It is a problem of the development of cities' master plans and growth strategies on the one hand, and of the design and improvement of urban spaces on the other, since the latter have become a vehicle for commercialization and sham in our postmodernist times.

2. POSTMODERNIST URBAN SPACE

In the postmodernist era, urban environment is increasingly perceived as a shopping mall, in which a symbol marks a point of consumption – an ephemeral, extemporal space losing its historical memory and its meaning as an anthropological category and a place which a person can relate to for self-identification.

Urban spaces are “phasing out” of the traditional conception of a city. Downtown areas are turning into commercial traps, says Bárbara Barreiro León.¹ A city center is becoming a theme park for tourists.

Rem Koolhaas² thinks that postmodernist space (Junkspace) is a sign of commercialization of urban centers, where the desire to lure a buyer and make him buy something comes to the fore. Public space in commercialized city centers often acquires the look of a fantastic reality, a city of dreams, a place where dreams come true.

¹ B. Barreiro León, *Urban theory in postmodern cities: Amnesiac spaces and ephemeral aesthetics*, URBS. Revista de Estudios Urbanos y Ciencias Sociales, 2017, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 57–65.

² R. Koolhaas. *Junkspace*, October 2002, 100, pp. 175–190.

Koolhaas thinks of Junkspace as nonstandard urban space built as a conglomerate of ideas, conceptions and dreams. Above all, it wants to entice a person with its eclectic hodge-podge of elements from all thinkable eras.

Rather than draw upon landscape elements, architectural detail and play of light and shadow, the postmodern city uses symbols and signs that tie the spectator to a fictitious commercial scenario instead of his or her memory of the place. As Bárbara Barreiro León notes,

Postmodern cities are not intended to accommodate the individual, but instead, aim to distract the society. The succession of different Postmodern, dream-like, unreal spaces distract society, making them believe that individuals are living in a utopia created in their image and likeness.³

A postmodern space first and foremost depends on connections between symbols and signs that meet society's requirements. It is a construct created by sheer semiotics – a fake city, a “show city,” a spectacle, an illusion/allusion. In a city like that, falsification is taken to the extreme; some Ukrainian sociologists and architects have aptly dubbed it *mistofikatsiya* (*misto* is the Ukrainian for “city”).

As a discourse, postmodernist architecture is not unlike a commercial or a reality show. By attaching importance only to what is spectacular, it is gradually losing touch with reality. An individual can no longer distinguish between the real image and the doctored one, and so a postmodernist city offers a collection of ideas and visuals constructed with the help of the individual's visual memory.⁴

People who have grown in such an environment become indiscriminate and look at architecture as a divertissement. It does not matter to them that the signs and codes of the streets of Las Vegas are symbols of ancient civilizations – fragments of styles borrowed from all over the globe. What is important is that they make up an eye-stopping picture. These are sensations not unlike those from a dream in which nothing has any effect or consequences: “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.”

Being extemporal, unreal and transient, these highly conventional places are unfit either for work or everyday living. In a city like that, time and space lose their essence. Urban space absorbs different tell-tale symbols from other historical, artistic and cultural contexts and interprets them as a reflection of modern society. This is supposed to corroborate the premise that stylistic innovation is no longer possible and the only way is to simulate styles of previous eras and mix them in such a way as to make them appear both brand-new and perfectly recognizable.

Perceived by consumers of postmodern architecture as something real, this experience comes straight from the media – the cinema, television, and the Internet. While no one has lived in the distant past, everyone knows how it is supposed to look.

However, the neglected condition of many potentially attractive urban spaces is a no less dangerous problem. Aaron Betsky⁵ points out that queer spaces such as abandoned industrial

³ B. Barreiro León, *op.cit.*, p. 58.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ A. Betsky, *Queer Space, Architecture and Same-Sex Desire*, William Morrow and Co. Inc., New York 1997.

facilities, dumps and vacant lots attract and become the places of expression of marginal groups, teenagers, gay communities and the like.

Appropriate spatial organization and design characteristic of this time and place and filled with local imagery rather than extemporal, pseudo-real signs and symbols borrowed from elsewhere – this is what the historical centers of most modern cities really expect and need from architects and space designers today.

3. PROBLEMS OF URBAN SPACE ORGANIZATION IN KYIV

Kyiv's two main streets, Volodymyrska and Khreshchatyk, are the quintessence of the city's identity and can be said to bear the nation's "genetic code." However, they are only partly used as a public space. The continuum of pedestrian public spaces along these two streets is far from formed. Its organization remains a topical task, even though in the case of Khreshchatyk, spatial connections to surrounding hills via arches and hiatuses in its tiered architecture were built into its original conception. How do we return its pedestrian streets, lanes, parks, courtyards, abandoned areas and other public spaces to the city?

This is the subject of a series of environment design projects by graduate students of the Department of Architecture, Construction and Design (Chair of Interior Design) of Kyiv's National Aviation University. The students were to identify potentially attractive spaces and integrate them into a comprehensive system, offering an interesting and context-related design.

They were set the following tasks: to analyze the condition of the existing built-up area and the inner space of a block; to assess its cultural heritage situation and restoration needs; and to identify the most relevant historic sites and events which need to be rediscovered, preserved or enhanced. Urban space research was made using spatial analysis, including by determining the ratio of transit and fixed spaces ("spaces of going and staying"). It was essential to see whether the former (sidewalks, squares, passages) are used as pedestrian spaces; how closed spaces are used; and if they can be connected to the main axis along Volodymyrska and Khreshchatyk and used as one continuous public space. Later on, the students were to summarize the status of historical heritage sites and public spaces in the area under examination; to blueprint a plan of activities for the regeneration of selected urban spaces and the restoration of relevant built-up areas; and to use symbols and codes related to the history and identity of the place (*genius loci*) in their space design work.

4. SPATIAL ANALYSIS

Organization of open public spaces has been a topical problem throughout history. While urban structure became increasingly complex, streets and squares remained its basic formative elements up to the late 19th century. Spatial analysis makes it possible to formalize a real-life situation and analyze an architectural space as an aesthetic formal constituent subject to the rules of composition.

Reduced to a space planning scheme, any detail of a spatial environment can be described using general laws of perception. Work on an environment design project begins with determining which elements of the environment are “figures” and which serve as a neutral “ground” (background) for them.⁶

An onlooker may regard an urban environment as a neutral background or canvas filled with separate spatial units (“figures”). The traditional psychological stereotype of an open urban space as outdoor environment is increasingly often giving way to its understanding as an urban interior.

Spatial analysis makes it easy to determine a city’s compositional space structure. For practicality’s sake, urban spaces may be classed into fixed, or closed (“spaces of staying”) and transit, or open (“spaces of going”).⁷

The pattern of a transit space shows the composition/structure of the relevant city-building detail. By identifying fixed (closed) spaces, we can establish the spatial density of the city-building detail, the presence of vacant elements (or those unrelated to the main composition), and the location of bottlenecks.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Spatial analysis has become an indispensable tool of selecting any type of spatial organization of any part of a city. While the overall pattern of pedestrian transit spaces gives an idea of the structure and composition of the system as a whole, the shape, rhythm and size of closed (fixed) spaces attached to them have influence on their functional content and design to an extent.

In this manner, a network of pedestrian public spaces can be formed and assigned various functions by uniting separate details of transit space into a consistent whole with fixed spaces such as courtyards, parks, children’s playgrounds and recreation areas.

However, open spaces of a finely detailed, visually clear design are perceived to be rigidly fixed and limiting an individual’s personal space and imaginations. Urban space should be conducive to personal development and architectural design. It must have a variety of visual expressions, and this is exactly what flexible function spaces serve. The city’s community will take part in forming these spaces, lending them touches of its own identity.

On the other hand, residents readily accept and use geometrically defined urban spaces which form a continuous flow around a mass of buildings.

Summing up, the task of an architect or urban designer is to form a certain composition from separate fragments of space and give a perceptible geometric shape to undefined space in between buildings, limiting it with walls, relief features and small architectural shapes. At the same time, he or she should refrain from strictly defining its function, leaving its users a certain freedom of action instead.

⁶ R. Trancik, *Finding lost space. Theories of urban design*, Van Nostrand Reinhold, New York 1986.

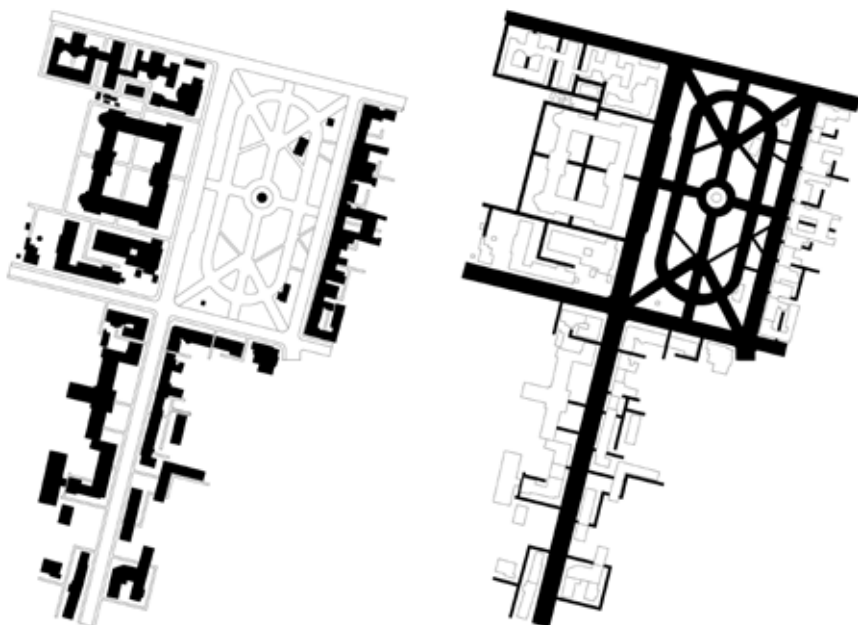
⁷ *Ibidem*.



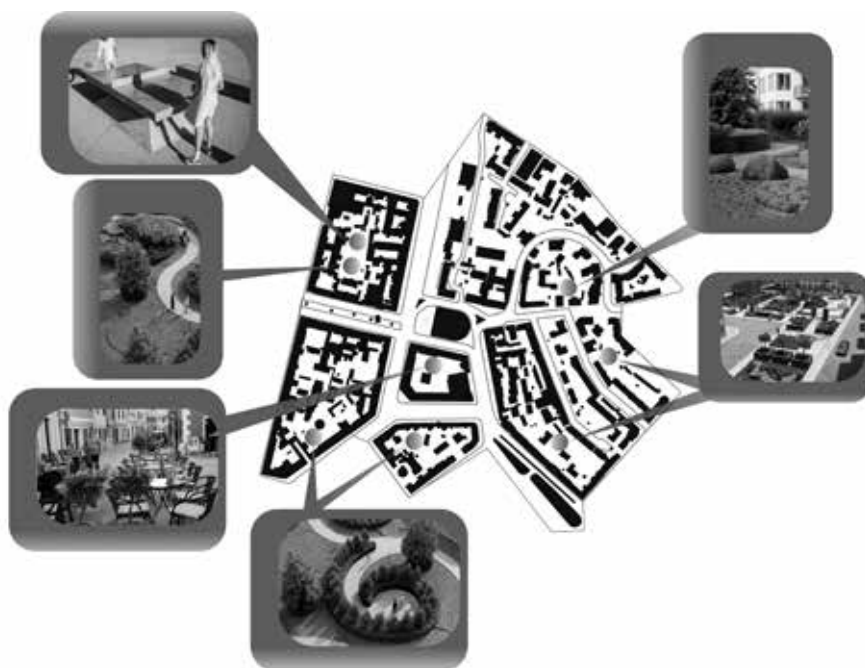
Ill. 1. *Antigone* residential complex in Montpellier, Ricardo Bofill, 1978–2000



Ill. 2. Spatial analysis of Khreschatyk and the neighboring districts, N. Pylypenko, Prof. O. Oliynyk



III. 3. Spatial analysis Volodymyrskaya Street, M. Kuprienko, Prof. O. Oliynyk



III. 4. Proposals for the regeneration of urban spaces Khreshchatyk Street, N. Pylypenko, Prof. O. Oliynyk

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Author's Note:

Olena Oliynyk, Assoc. Prof. Ph.D. Arch.

Architect, urbanist, editor, teacher and interior designer, senior research fellow, professor, Ph.D., Arch. Head of Interior design department of Faculty of Architecture, Building and Design, National Aviation University, Vice-President of National Union of Architects. Founder and chief editor of “Architecture and Prestige” magazine (1995–2008). Regional coordinator of the EU granted Project “Regional Cooperation for the Cultural Heritage Development” (2012–14). UNESCO-UIA Architectural Education Commission & UNESCO-UIA Validation Council Member (2014–2020), UIA WP Heritage and Cultural Identity Member. Extensive experience during 38 years in architecture, urban development and historic preservation on very high professional level. Published as editor and author 42 professional full-colored “Architecture and Prestige”, four textbooks for Master’s students and more than 200 articles in different research editions. Author of numbers of projects of residential, office and cultural buildings, regeneration urban projects, interiors of residential and common buildings.

archiprestig@gmail.com